The Benefits of Online Alternative Provision

A paper exploring the advantages and effectiveness of virtual learning for pupils in alternative provision in the UK

There are currently an estimated 35,600 pupils accessing alternative provision, according to official statistics.

Introduction

This in-depth article looks at the current educational climate and where alternative provision fits in. It seeks to ascertain why online alternative provision (AP) is a beneficial route for schools to take and how online AP can benefit individuals – academically and in terms of improving mental health.

Contents

Alternative Provision (AP): the Current Landscape

Mainstream schooling doesn't suit all learners' needs, at all times.

Alternative provision exists to support pupils who cannot access mainstream education. This may be due to a vast number of reasons.

- Special educational needs

- Challenging behaviour

- Physical health conditions

- Mental health challenges

- Emotionally-based school avoidance

- Teenage pregnancy

- Experience of bullying

- Young people in care

Characteristics of pupils in alternative provision

The demographic characteristics of pupils in AP differ greatly from those in mainstream education.

For example, there is a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas where a high proportion of the school population is educated full-time in AP (as reported in the Centre for Social Justice analysis of Index of Multiple Deprivation data and pupil numbers from Department for Education, 2019. Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 2019).

Statistics from 2019 also showed that pupils in AP schools were almost six times as likely to have SEND than children in mainstream schools, with 81 per cent on the SEND register compared to 14 per cent in mainstream. The primary need for four in five students with identified SEND is social, emotional and mental health (SEMH)

Department for Education, 2019. Statistics: Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Certain ethnic groups were also over-represented in state-maintained AP: 3.3 per cent of pupils were Black-Caribbean, 4.0 per cent were White and Black Caribbean, and 1.2 per cent were Gypsy Roma. This compares to 1.1 per cent, 1.5 per cent and 0.3 per cent of pupils in mainstream respectively.

Department for Education, 2019. Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 2019

More recent information tells us:

The number of pupils attending alternative provision has increased by over 3,100 (10%) to 35,600 in 2021/22. As in previous years, most pupils are boys (74.3%). Pupils in AP have a lower rate of free school meal eligibility (20.4%) than the overall school population (22.5%).

Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Government publication, June 2022

Similar statistics are seen in Wales, where there are 2,254 pupils receiving some type of Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) provision (including Pupil Referral Units). That's 4.8 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales, which is down from 5.6 of every 1,000 pupils in 2009/10.

There are 1,814 EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school. That is 3.8 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales, which is up from 2.1 of every 1,000 pupils in 2009/10. The number of EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school appears to be trending upwards, having nearly doubled proportionately since 2009/10.

The percentage of EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school is 80.5%, up from 42% in 2009/10.

The rate of elective home-educated pupils in Wales, in 2021/22, is 9.8 of every 1,000 pupils, up from 1.6 of every 1,000 pupils in 2009/10, and the rate has increased each year since then. The rate has increased in all local authorities.

In 2021/22 the rate of EOTAS pupils with SEN / ALN increased compared to 2009/10. The 2009/10 rate was 8.1 of every 1000 pupils, compared to 20.5 of every 1000 pupils in 2021/22.

36.4% of pupils mainly educated outside school were eligible for free school meals in 2021/22, compared to 21.3% of pupils in school (PLASC) eligible for FSM.

Pupils educated other than at school: September 2021 to August 2022, Welsh government statistics

Children in AP (or EOTAS) are some of our most vulnerable

In 2020, The Centre for Social Justice published Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision: A manifesto for system improvement. Key findings from their analysis included:

- In 13 LAs in England not a single child in AP has passed their English and maths GCSE in the past three years.

- In three LAs, not a single teacher in AP is qualified.

- One in 50 pupils in the North East was achieving a basic pass in maths and English, compared to one in 12 in Greater London.

- The number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving AP is far higher than that in any area in England (even the most deprived) where students are educated in mainstream education.

The impact of Covid-19 on pupils in AP

Some studies suggest that the return to usual school routines post-Covid-19 may have led to an influx of new children into AP. Even now, the pandemic is having lasting effects on some pupils and the way they are responding to and accessing education.

- While health and safety concerns remained a priority during the pandemic, schools may have had a lower tolerance for the transgression of school rules around social distancing.

- Schools may have also struggled to re-engage some learners after school routines were so heavily disrupted during the height of the pandemic.

- Pupils who were already subject to anxiety relating to factors such as friendships, workload and health may have experienced greater difficulties than others upon the return to school, post-Covid-19.

In November 2021, the schools inspectorate Ofsted launched an urgent inquiry into a sharp rise in the number of primary-age children – some as young as five – being excluded from school and placed in institutions.

The chief inspector of schools in England, Amanda Spielman, told The Guardian newspaper at the time that 'some children were being removed from mainstream schools because their needs and behaviour were seen as "too challenging", and were being placed in alternative provision (AP) "with little thought of their futures"'.

The paper reported that Spielman had called on the government to make it a legal requirement for all AP to be registered. It was reported that inspectors have found pupils in unregistered settings playing video games all day in inappropriate and unsafe buildings where staff do not appear to care whether they attend or not.

The 2022 AP Quality Toolkit

IntegratED, a coalition of partner organisations working to reduce preventable exclusions and improve the quality of education for children excluded from school, released an Alternative Provision Quality Toolkit in 2022. All providers of AP should be aware of this toolkit and how it can be used to support AP settings and all pupils in AP. The toolkit outlines 13 quality areas of AP that impact on pupils' experience and educational outcomes. These are:

01.
Workforce development and wellbeing

02.
Home and family engagement

03.
Partnership working

04.
Research and innovation

05.
Pupil induction

06.
Attendance and engagement

07.
Supporting pupils' needs

08.
Quality of education

09.
Personal development

10.
Qualifications

11.
Assessment of need

12.
Appropriate transition

13.
Post-16 destinations

With all these areas taken into account, all alternative provision providers and settings can work towards consistently high-quality education provision for all AP pupils.

Online Alternative Provision (AP)

Many different versions of alternative provision exist. There are various settings across the UK, including pupil referral units (PRUs), AP academies, AP free schools, independent providers, further education colleges and voluntary sector providers. There are also hospital education providers.

Across the range of provision, there exists vast inconsistency and a huge variation in standards. Online AP can provide a solution to address consistency, safeguarding and standards, with schools and providers working together to ensure the best provision and outcomes for individual pupils.

Among its recommendations for system improvement, the Centre for Social Justice 2020 manifesto suggested:

1. Children in AP should have access to the same broad, aspirational curriculum and educational opportunities as their peers.

2. AP needs highly trained people.

3. Improve data collection and tracking for pupils in AP.

Online AP provides supplementary education to schools, PRUs and local education authorities. When done well, it can support settings to meet the needs of those vulnerable learners and address the points above.

1. Pupils accessing online AP can have access to a broad, aspirational curriculum which allows them to close learning gaps and access the same educational opportunities as their peers.

2. Online AP teachers are experienced in supporting learners with their emotional needs as well as their academic needs. They are subject specialists who can deliver tailored learning in small groups or through one-to-one sessions.

3. Online AP teachers can track and report on the progress of the pupils they teach throughout the learning programme. Providers can report on the overall outcomes and success rates of the pupils they have worked with.

Pupils in AP need academic and emotional wellbeing support. Many settings find a blended approach to be most beneficial to their students (though this will not be possible in certain circumstances). Virtual learning delivered by experienced teachers in structured sessions can take place in an AP setting with staff available to support learners face-to-face as they learn or follow up with activities after the online session.

Benefits of Online AP for Schools

There are many reasons why schools and colleges might choose to use online AP to support their learners.

This section sets out the advantages that online AP can provide to a school, college or other AP settings.

01.

Organisation and administration

Whether it's provision for one pupil or much larger numbers, online AP can be used to support learners at any time of the academic year for pupils in any year group. For example, a student may need learning support part-way through Year 10 or 11 and could relatively seamlessly continue to study for GCSE examinations using online AP.

Online AP providers manage enrolments and transfers. Timetables are organised in collaboration with school staff and lessons are scheduled at a time to suit learners. Unlike some other forms of AP, online AP providers are able to utilise their teams of standby teachers to operate in a similar way to mainstream schools in so far as there is a team of teachers to cover all lessons, which mitigates against staff absence.

02.

Continuity of provision

Online AP can be implemented as a short-term solution or can be used to support pupils for much longer periods of time. Some pupils particularly need the stability this sort of solution can offer, such as young people in care and young carers; during challenging times, their education and learning can become almost impossible for them to cope with or prioritise. The online solution offers recordings of lessons and online resources which are accessible 24/7.

03.

Flexible support

Online AP can fit in and around school timetables and be tailored to suit individual learners' needs. Various subjects at different levels are offered and teaching styles and activities can be adapted. Ongoing monitoring and reporting, as well as regular communication with a designated member of staff in the education setting or LA means the provision can be adapted as necessary, to meet individuals' needs.

04.

Standard of teaching

Online AP providers seek to employ experienced teachers who are subject specialists. Unlike sourcing teachers locally to work face-to-face in settings, online AP offers schools access to these teachers wherever they are in the country.

05.

Reporting and monitoring

Schools or colleges can keep track of their AP pupils via reporting and monitoring systems. This means they can access data regarding attendance, engagement and academic progress for each learner.

06.

A partnered approach

Online AP is often used by schools and LAs as a solution for pupils to remain on their school roll and still feel part of the school community. In many cases, this intervention aids the reintegration of learners into mainstream education. Online AP can support them academically and emotionally before they are placed in traditional offsite AP settings. Schools can utilise the high-quality academically-focused online AP alongside their own interventions to ensure gaps in pupils' learning don't arise.

Benefits of Online AP for Learners

Virtual learning provision is the solution for many pupils. Where feasible, the direct intention of the intervention is to support learners to return to their mainstream school or college.

This section highlights the benefits of online AP for learners.

01.
Keeping up with school during absence

Pupils may be absent from school for short periods of time or longer periods, depending on the reason for their absence. Physical and mental health conditions may lead to their schooling being disrupted. This is where online AP can be particularly useful in supporting them to maintain their school work and avoid developing learning gaps.

02.
Time and place

Some conditions or circumstances may place restrictions on a pupil's continued mainstream learning. Online AP means that pupils can attend online classes alongside other learners at a time that suits them and from a suitable location. All that is needed is a broadband connection and a computer.

In many cases, online AP also offers recorded sessions and catch-up or additional activities. This means that learners who do have to miss a timetabled lesson can still access the learning at a more appropriate time for them.

03.
Confidence and social skills

Online AP is often delivered to groups of pupils. This means that pupils can continue to develop their confidence and communication skills in a small group setting. Small groups may comprise learners from all over the country, offering a chance for pupils to develop social skills with others who don't know them in other settings; this anonymity can be useful to some individuals.

04.
Additional support

Sometimes learners need a little extra tailored support. Online AP has the scope to offer additional support for learners when they need it. Providers employ multiple teachers, which means they can ensure teachers have the capacity to offer additional support, whether it's one-to-one or in a small group.

05.
Familiarity, consistency and security

For pupils coping with anxiety disorders, learning in a familiar setting where they feel safe and secure can ease some of their stress. Online AP can be accessed from any location suited to supporting learners' needs, with access to a computer and WiFi.

The security of a safe space in which to learn, where they know what to expect in each session, is of great importance to many. This includes working within the same peer group each session and, crucially, with the same teacher. This allows pupils to control the pace and level of interaction, which they can increase as they grow in confidence.

Online AP can offer a consistent approach with lessons that follow the same structure each time. This prevents spikes in anxiety leading to further barriers to learning. In an online learning environment, anxious learners can gain control over how they communicate with their online teachers and their peers.

The online classroom shares many similarities with the physical classroom that pupils are likely to be familiar with. There are opportunities for discussion as well as private chats with the teacher. Reactions can be demonstrated through the use of emoticons, to show agreement, disagreement or to raise a hand to ask a question. Drawing tools are used for pupils to interact with the lessons, just as whiteboards might be used in a physical classroom. This familiarity helps pupils to settle quickly into the online classroom.

06.
Teacher–pupil bond

A different relationship can be developed between an online teacher and their learners, compared with a teacher based in an education setting. An online teacher offers a fresh approach to learning and can represent a fresh start. Although a teacher will be briefed by the school, college or LA on the student and their needs, they may be seen as an external, separate tutor by the student; one who won't judge them and who isn't part of day-to-day decisions and protocols they have to follow in their setting.

This distance between the online teacher and the pupil can work extremely well in creating a bond based on trust where the pupil sees the online teacher as solely there to help them.

07.
Engagement

The Centre for Social Justice polled almost 7000 teachers and school leaders in May 2020 to ask what they think would require the most work once schools re-open fully. Secondary school teachers consider student engagement as second only to catching up on lost learning time.

Catch them before they fall: What works in supporting vulnerable children to stay in education, The Centre for Social Justice publication, July 2020

Government-commissioned research identifies disengaged pupils as one of four 'categories of need' for students in AP, stating that disengaged pupils will often come to AP with very low rates of attendance. In many instances, there may be complicating factors relating to family background or experience of the care system. This group of pupils will also include those at risk of becoming or already involved with gangs, and those at risk of entering or involved with the criminal justice system.

Department for Education, 2018. Alternative provision market analysis. ISOS Partnership.
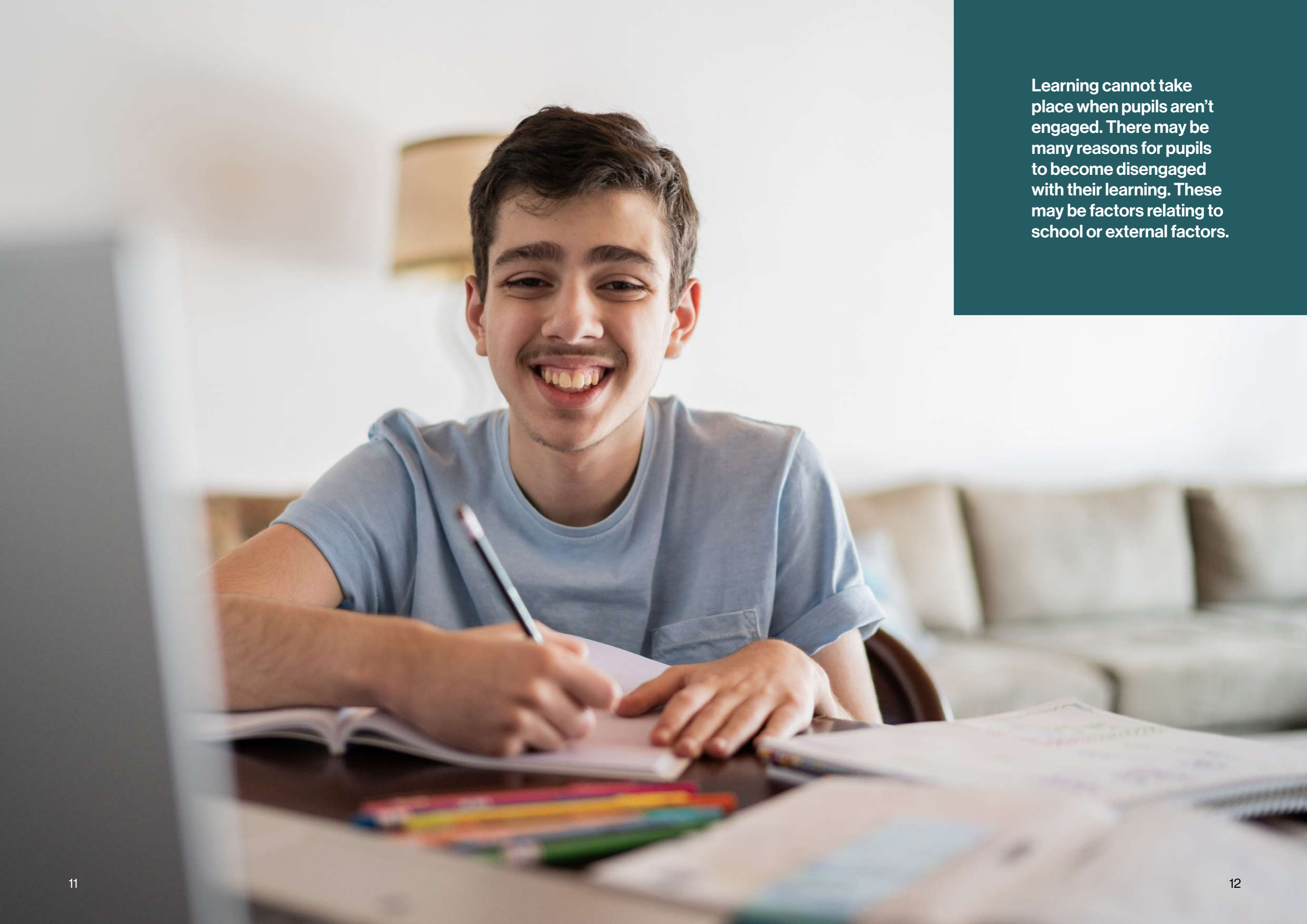
Learning cannot take place when pupils aren't engaged. There may be many reasons for pupils to become disengaged with their learning. These may be factors relating to school or external factors.

Effective Online Alternative Provision

What should schools look for when choosing a provider?

Effective online AP is much the same as effective teaching and learning face-to-face in many ways. Teachers' rapport with their students, the students' safety and wellbeing, teachers' secure subject knowledge, engagement levels of the learners and pupils achieving successful outcomes are all paramount.

This section of the paper focuses on what effective online alternative provision looks like and, essentially, what schools, colleges and PRUs should consider when selecting an online AP provider.

Safeguarding

Of course, safeguarding is of the utmost importance when employing any teachers. Online AP providers should carry out thorough checks on their teachers, following safer recruitment and selection processes.

Online AP providers must detail how they ensure:

- all data is protected

- all learners are safe at all times

- staff are aware of all Safeguarding and Child Protection policies

- staff are aware of the process for raising concerns about a pupil

- staff and learners are aware of internet safety and e-safety issues

Wellbeing support

Experienced, knowledgeable and empathetic teachers are essential to providing supportive online AP. When tutors fully understand the challenges learners are facing, due to their unique set of circumstances, the learning can be structured to their specific needs. This level of support is particularly crucial when an individual is missing school due to stress, anxiety or other emotionally-based school avoidance issues.

Wellbeing support also takes the form of aiding students with their attitude to learning and confidence. Measuring and rewarding effort is a crucial part of any positive learning experience. When pupils feel their effort has been recognised and rewarded (through verbal or written praise, a grade for effort or a certificate, for example), they are inclined to want to continue.

Tailored teaching and learning

High-quality online AP ensures pupils' gaps in learning are clearly identified so they can be specifically addressed. Students shouldn't be covering what they already know; rather working to achieve in areas they need help with.

High quality APs will deliver programmes tailored to the needs of the students. The timetable each student has will reflect the number and range of subjects they are in a position to study. Furthermore, the teachers will differentiate according to the students' differing academic needs. Teachers will use a range of classroom tools to this end including breakout rooms, polls, pods where individual responses can be gathered and graded tasks

Skills-based learning

Almost one in two children educated in alternative provision schools becomes NEET [not in education, employment or training] immediately after their GCSEs, compared to one in 20 from mainstream schools.

Centre for Social Justice, May 2020. Warming the cold spots of alternative provision: A manifesto for system improvement (p.33)

The best quality online AP can go beyond teaching academic subjects in order to gain qualifications and teach skills such as:

- problem-solving skills

- critical thinking skills

- analytical thinking skills

- communication skills

- presentation skills

- essay writing skills

- revision and exam techniques

Of course, gaining these skills will benefit learners significantly in terms of academic achievement but it will also contribute to their mindset and attitude to learning. As they develop these skills, they'll feel more confident to take on new challenges.

Recordings and online activities

Pupils have varying needs and learn in different ways. There will also be occasions when pupils miss a lesson. If they can access recorded lessons at a later date (ideally 24/7), this allows them to catch up with missed sessions or go back over a lesson's content and maybe repeat activities to embed the learning or revise particular topics before an assessment.

Varying the type of interactive online activities available to pupils means all learning styles are catered for. This not only increases engagement but helps to secure the learning. Demonstrations, written responses, polls and quizzes can all be used to make the learning fun and the content stick. It also aids assessment so teachers can monitor pupils' progress.

Conclusion

Online alternative provision can provide schools with tutors who offer specialisms, including SEND, online tuition, English as an additional language (EAL) and subject-specific support. This is the tailored support they might not be able to achieve through face-to-face teachers or tutors available in their area.

The flexibility and continuity of online AP is of huge benefit to schools and their pupils, while the wellbeing support that online teachers can offer is essential for so many AP pupils.

With so many well-established online AP providers, there is almost certainly a solution for all schools to support their AP pupils, in any year group, both academically and emotionally.

Supporting hundreds of schools each year, Academy21 brings students with behavioural, medical, and mental health needs a pathway to achieve strong recognised outcomes.

In a full virtual schooling environment, Academy21 are able to provide students with the flexibility, pastoral care, and quality education they need to get back on track with progress, become enthusiastic learners, and return to a mainstream classroom in the future.

Academy 21
Alternative provision online

Prepared by The Content Classroom
for Academy 21.

The Content Classroom